

From a reluctant actor to artiste nonpareil, it was a long journey

By Ambarish Mishra
Times News Network

MUMBAI: Ashok Kumar Ganguly symbolised the spirit, style and substance of popular cinema. His celluloid career spanning more than six decades represented, as it were, the gradual evolution of the concept of the male protagonist and his trek to stardom, decade after decade.

The graduation of the gawky Brahmin of *Achhut Kanya* to the street-savvy crusader of *Kismet* marked the transformation not merely of the actor's screen persona, but the art of story-telling on celluloid.

The box-office success of *Kismet*, *Mahal*, *Sangraam* and *Mashaal* in the 1940s invested Ashok Kumar with a halo of glamour (complete with a hat, a cigarette dangling from his lips and that famous smile) which he had scarcely fancied when the legendary Himansu Rai of Bombay Talkies pulled him out of the laboratory and offered him *Jeevan Naiyya*, his debut film of 1933.

Talking to this correspondent a few years ago, Ashok Kumar had recalled the trauma. "I was working as laboratory assistant in Bombay Talkies. I didn't know anything about acting and, frankly, I didn't want to know. The thought that I was to play Devika Rani's lover sent a chill up my spine. She had charisma. She spoke fluent English and interacted with the directors of Bombay Talkies—top people such as Sir Richard Temple and Sir Chimanlal Setalvad. She was Rai's wife and, as such, she virtually controlled the affairs of the company."

Devika Rani, Rai and S. Mukherjee (Ashok Kumar's brother-in-law) groomed the reluctant actor, whose hard-won resolve to face the movie camera was ruptured by routine letters from his father. "My father, like most of his generation, had a strong antipathy for the entertainment industry. He thought films cast an evil influence on young minds. And young I was in 1933." After *Jeevan Naiyya*, Ganguly Sr. advised his son to return to Khandwa, the Madhya Pradesh hometown of the Ganguly, and, in keeping with the family's tradition, to pursue a legal career.

Years later, the son fulfilled his father's wish, albeit on the silver screen. In Asit Sen's *Mamata*, Ashok Kumar portrayed a lawyer who defends his beloved—a 'fallen woman'—with exceptional brilliance.

Ashok Kumar's repertoire was remarkably impressive. His oeuvre included fast-paced thrillers (*Howrah Bridge*) and costume dramas (*Chitralekha*) to family dramas (*Meherbaan*, *Bheegi Rani*) and deeply moving love tales (*Bandini*, *Teri Surat*, *Meri Aankhein* and *Parineeta*). He exhibited a natural flair for comedy as evidenced by films such as *Victoria No. 203*, *Khoobsurat* and *Shaukeen*, to name a few.

The Ganguly gaggle—Ashok, Kishore Kumar and Anup Kumar—showcased its talents in its home pro-



Ashok Kumar with Devika Rani in *Achhut Kanya*.

duction, *Chalti Kaa Naam Gaadi*, a rip-roaring comedy with traces of a Marx Brothers flick.

With *Oonche Log* and *Kaanoon* in the 1960s, Ashok Kumar branched out to 'character roles'. His finest film in the category was Hrishikesh Mukherjee's *Aashirwaad* (1971), a searing story of a generous zamindaar who loves music, poetry, children and *pakhawaj*.

In *Aashirwaad*, Ashok Kumar tugged at the heart-strings of the young ones with his famous song, *Rail gaadi, zhuk, zhuk, zhuk*. The film reinforced Ashok Kumar's credentials as actor nonpareil and invested him with the status of a paterfamilias—the 'Dadamuni'—of Hindi cinema.

In a bid to revive Bombay Talkies after the untimely death of Rai and Devika Rani's exit from the studios, Ashok Kumar took over the company's reins and produced *Mahal*, *Ziddi* and *Majboor*. More films (such as *Parineeta* and *Raagini*) were made by him under the banner of Ashok Kumar Productions.

The thespian briefly romanced the small screen with *Bhum Bhavani*, a breezy TV serial which billed him and Anoop Kumar as Men In Black caught in hilarious situations. As the interpreter of *Hum Log*, India's first mega-serial on Doordarshan in the late 1980s, Ashok Kumar, wearing dark glasses, captured the imagination of a TV-struck nation.

The renowned actor was honoured with numerous awards, including the prestigious Dadasaheb Phalke award and film's lifetime achievement award in 1996.